

CULTURAL NOSTALGIA IN MO YAN'S *A LATE BLOOMER*

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Abstract. This paper explores how nostalgic feeling is present in *A Late Bloomer*, by Chinese novelist Mo Yan. *A Late Bloomer* evokes a sense of nostalgia of the past. In the face of the rapid development of rural China, Mo Yan makes a nostalgic narration in the work. Mo Yan's work vividly depicts Northeast Gaomi Township, blending its physicality with mythic and historical dimensions. This space serves as a cultural microcosm, reflecting tensions between tradition and modernity, rural and urban. His ability to use this setting as a narrative kaleidoscope allows for a cultural reinterpretation of Chinese culture and history. Nostalgia often operates as a tool of narrative tension in Mo Yan's fiction. His protagonists frequently experience a push-pull dynamic, torn between their memories and the harsh realities of the present. This reflects broader cultural anxieties about modernization and the erosion of traditional values. Andreas Huyssen analyzes the characteristics of culture memory, and examines how modern technological advancements and culture shifts contribute to a sense of temporal dislocation and memory loss. He discusses the pervasiveness of cultural amnesia as we approach the end of the 20th century. This paper uses the concept of cultural amnesia to analyze the reason why Mo Yan is nostalgic. This paper discusses how nostalgic plot is constituted in the work, and how Mo Yan deals with remembering and forgetting. It focuses on the setting and characters that capture the comparison between the past and the present.

Keywords: *Mo Yan, A Late Bloomer, nostalgia, memory, amnesia*

Introduction

A Late Bloomer is Mo Yan's first fiction collection eight years after he won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2012. It is a collection of 12 novellas and short stories. The collection shows two main themes: one is about the changes happening in rural China through Mo Yan's eyes, the other is about the literary circles where Mo Yan is a member. This paper focuses on the former. Whether realistic or absurd, Mo Yan's fiction shows us the lives of common people in rural China. And for the first time, Mo Yan portrays contemporary people in his stories. These stories are set against a backdrop of a rapidly changing China. They span several significant historical periods in Chinese history, including the Cultural Revolution, economic reforms, and post-reform era. At his book launch, Mo Yan said: "Many of the characters in this novel are my primary school classmates. My primary school classmates suddenly go back to almost 50 or 60 years ago, so the story of more than half a century ago has been continued to the present. The characters in this novel together with me are slowly changing, growing up and maturing late with the development of society". "Besides the 'new man' and new things in the country, Mo Yan also touches on some historical events to enrich and enlarge the contexts of the short stories" (Jing, 2021). Mo Yan weaves these historical periods into the narratives, using them as a backdrop to explore the theme of "late maturity", which can be explained in the categories of personal growth, adaptation, and the tension between tradition and modernity. In the second story of this collection, *A Later Bloomer*, Mo Yan tells the story of changing times-late

bloomers finally get successful and shine in suitable situations in a late mature society. Each period shapes the characters in distinct ways, influencing their choices, relationships, and ultimately, their paths to maturity. As for the definition of "late maturity", scholar Wang (1993) comments: "Compared with 'early maturity', 'late maturity' has complicated meanings to Mo Yan: it may mean a late bloomer, full of staying power; it may also mean belatedly knowing and suddenly understanding, even starting from behind at all costs. In any case, the time gap between 'early' and 'late' makes the society clockwise no longer reliable". "Late maturity" involves achieving personal growth, self-realization, or success later in life than typically expected. This concept contrasts with the societal expectation that significant personal or professional milestones should be achieved in one's youth or early adulthood. It also involves a period of introspection and reevaluation of past experiences. In Mo Yan's view, "late maturity" represents "the spirit of seeking change and innovation, unwilling to stay still too early". He highlights the idea that it is never too late to grow, change, and achieve one's potential. On top of this, Mo Yan's story shows that individuals' late maturity is influenced by China's rapid economic reforms and social mobility, reflecting the broader societal shifts that allow for late blooming. The society depicted in the story *A Late Bloomer* is one that undergoes significant socio-economic and cultural transformations, influencing the characters' journeys toward late maturity. This society is characterized by rapid modernization, historical upheavals, and changing social norms, which collectively shape the theme of late maturity.

Meanwhile, Mo Yan blends traditional Chinese values with the impacts of modernization, economic reform, and political upheaval in his stories. They capture the dynamic interplay between these elements, using the characters' experiences to explore the connection between nostalgia and late maturity. In the stories, the narrator "I", Mo Yan, returns to his hometown, Northeast Gaomi Township, and encounters a series of new things and new people. Meanwhile, there are always some dreams haunting him since childhood. "A person desperately wants to become some what, but he has never become that what; then this would become his dream through his whole lifetime" (Yan, 2020). These words in the preface of *Left-Handed Scythe*, the first story in the collection, seem to encapsulate the fiction's nostalgic narration. Nostalgia for the past provides a framework for understanding the present and motivates the narrator to achieve late maturity. This interplay adds emotional depth and complexity to the narrative, highlighting the importance of memory and reflection in both personal growth and social development. Through this lens, Mo Yan explores the universal themes of time, change, and the enduring impact of the past on our present selves. The nostalgic impulse quickly turns into a strong feeling of shock which showcases the impact of amnesia. The great change in the hometown makes Mo Yan feel being in a new world, a totally unfamiliar world. In this new hometown, those late bloomers are so clever, and so free-a commercialized and digital world. They finally find out the suitable environment for flourishing. They can even restore nostalgia and make nostalgia a marketable commodity. However, these late bloomers are not really mature in Mo Yan's eyes. They are more like opportunists, urgent for quick success, which is a precisely symptom of a rapid changing society. The old hometown seems to be replaced by the new hometown, only existing in the narrator's memories. The transformation of the hometown, the characters' selective memory, the narrator "I" struggling to recall significant details about the childhood home and neighbourhood, all of these contribute to a rich narrative that delves into the consequence of forgetting. **Mo Yan uses the**

concept of “late maturity” to explore cultural amnesia, including the complexities of memory, identity, and history, both on a personal and collective level. Through the lens of amnesia, Mo Yan provides a multifaceted narrative about “late maturity”, which showcases the author’s critical thinking about time, memory, and history.

Researchers and critics focus on Mo Yan’s exploring history, culture and memory. In the article *The Literary World of Mo Yan*, Wang and Berry (2000) discusses the evolution of Mo Yan’s literary contributions, with a focus on his cultural imagination, historical narrative, and nostalgia. Wang and Berry (2000) argue, Mo Yan’s historical spaces allow readers to see how cultural memory and imagination shape the way history is remembered and retold: “In Mo Yan’s literary world, the past and the future, desire and fantasy are transformed into a flesh-and-blood panorama”. Wang and Berry (2000) give the definition of “historical space”: the “historical space” includes, but is not restricted to, the traditional dialectical discourse on space, time, history, and the ontological hometown (yuanxiang); it refers to how writers like Mo Yan three-dimensionalize a linear historical narrative and imagination, and how they locate concrete people, events, and places into a flowing, kaleidoscopic historical coordinate. In Mo Yan’s works, historical space refers to more than just a setting; it serves as a dynamic framework where time, memory, and cultural identity intersect. His fictional Northeast Gaomi Township is not merely a geographical location but a deeply symbolic space where history is brought to life and reimagined. Wang and Berry note that this cultural framework deepens the narrative, making it not just a story of individuals but also a reflection on collective identity and cultural evolution. Meanwhile, Wang and Berry hold a view that Mo Yan’s works often use nostalgia to explore both personal and collective memories, but his approach is nuanced and layered. Rather than idealizing the past, he presents it in dual forms—one that romanticizes it and another that critiques it. Mo Yan’s use of nostalgia thus creates a narrative tension. While memories of the past offer comfort and meaning, they are also a reminder of what has been lost or corrupted. By framing nostalgia in this way, Mo Yan critiques the simplifications of cultural memory, showing that longing for the past is both a source of identity and a confrontation with its complexities.

Inge (2000) examines Mo Yan’s works by focusing on his global reception and artistic contributions in the article *Mo Yan: Through Western Eyes*. Inge contextualizes Mo Yan’s works within both Chinese and global literary traditions, offering insights into the interplay of history, culture, and narrative innovation. Inge notes that Mo Yan’s works engage deeply with cultural identity: His rootedness in Northeast Gaomi Township mirrors Faulkner’s and García Márquez’s regionalism. The fictional setting allows Mo Yan to depict rural life and culture, with rich imagery and folklore interspersed with harsh realities. Furthermore, Mo Yan’s global appeal lies in his ability to address universal themes like power, human resilience, and morality while grounding them in uniquely Chinese contexts. Inge concludes that Mo Yan’s literature is a testament to the fluid interaction between local history and global culture. His stories challenge traditional historiography and cultural norms, inviting readers to reinterpret the interplay of myth, memory, and truth. He (2014) situates Mo Yan’s *Frog* within the historical framework of China’s one-child policy, emphasizing its role as a significant socio-political event. He argues that *Frog* not only reflects on the historical traumas of China’s one-child policy but also critiques the silence surrounding its consequences. The narrative delves into trauma and its belated manifestation. These memories, suppressed or distorted by the weight of political and social pressures, reflect a

collective amnesia surrounding the policy's human cost: "it may happen that the social environment that is responsible for the coming-into-being of trauma prevents the victims from knowing the truth or breaking the silence that surrounds it" (He, 2014). Wang (1993) examines imaginary nostalgia in native soil literature, illustrating how native soil literature has evolved from Shen Congwen's intricate nostalgia to increasingly complex and fragmented representations of home and memory. Wang intricately ties nostalgia to culture, history, and an evolving literary imagination, demonstrating that the longing for "home" is not just a recollection but also an imaginative act of reconstructing what may never have existed. Wang suggests that these works are less about preserving the past and more about interrogating the act of remembrance itself. This imaginary nostalgia reflects both cultural loss and creative possibility, making it a poignant critique of modernity.

In line with this, this paper will focus on the concept of "late maturity" to address the issues such as memory, history, and culture by using the theories of culture memory and cultural amnesia. The term "late maturity" carries a complex meaning for Mo Yan. It can imply delayed wisdom or a late blooming, and also can hint at opportunism and a twisted sense of justice. **Through the analysis of the characters' experiences of late blooming, the paper will examine how Mo Yan represents the crisis of memory in Chinese society both in nostalgia and amnesia perspectives.** The remembering and forgetting of personal memory are intricately intertwined with cultural amnesia and nostalgia in Mo Yan's hometown narratives. Personal memories shape individual identities and actions, while cultural amnesia maintains social harmony and collective identity in a rapidly changing society. Nostalgia serves as a bridge, connecting characters to their past and preserving traditional values in the present. Mo Yan believes that a true late bloomer should be able to confront and rediscover memories of the past and integrate past experiences with his or her present self. Similarly, a late blooming society, while rooted in its past, can grow and adapt over time. Two stories in the collection will be analyzed through the frame of cultural amnesia.

Culture memory and cultural amnesia

In this study, the theories of culture memory will be used to analyze how Mo Yan represents and interrogates the construction of memory in Chinese society. Huyssen (1995) examines the challenges posed by cultural amnesia and the ways in which societies negotiate their relationship with the past in a rapidly changing world in his work *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. Huyssen discusses how modern societies are characterized by cultural amnesia, where historical memory is often short-lived or fragmented. He explores the tension between the demands of the present and the preservation of historical memory. Huyssen highlights the relationship between representation and memory: representation is based on memory, while memory is also based on representation. Huyssen says, "[t]he past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. [However], this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity" (Huyssen, 1995). The past has become memory through belated representation. Rather than leading us to the event itself, representation brings us to the memory of the event. This means that what we remember is always reconstructed and influenced by present circumstances. Memory is always mediated through cultural representations. This mediation can be a source of creativity but also a cause of anxiety.

As a kind of representation, literature provides an interpretation of the past from the perspective of present, because “[t]he temporal status of any act of memory is always the present [...]” (Huysen, 1995). The process of re-presentation means that memory is influenced by the present moment. Current cultural, social, and political contexts shape how we remember the past.

In order to explain the obsessions with memory in contemporary amnesiac culture, Huysen introduces the concept of “twilight memories”: “generational memories on the wane due to the passing of time and the continuing speed of technological modernization, and memories that reflect the twilight status of memory itself” (Huysen, 1995). The term of “twilight” showcases the in-between state of memory. “Twilight memories”, as a metaphor, refers to both coexistence and conflicts of temporal layers within cultural memory. Twilight represents a transitional phase between day and night, embody a state of in-betweenness. Huysen uses this metaphor to describe the contemporary condition of memory, which exists in a liminal space between remembering and forgetting, between past and future. Just as twilight blurs the clear distinction between day and night, “twilight memories” suggest a blurring of the boundaries between the past and the present. This reflects the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterize contemporary engagements with memory. In a rapidly changing world, traditional linear narratives of the past often intersect and interact with newer forms of memory, creating a hybrid temporal landscape. Traditional anchors of memory and history become less stable. The twilight metaphor alludes to a crisis in the modern understanding of time and progress. The future no longer holds the same promise of progress and improvement, leading to a turn toward the past and a focus on memory. On the other hand, different generations, communities, and ideologies may have divergent interpretations of the past, leading to debates and struggles over how memory and history should be represented. Huysen notes that these conflicts can be analyzed within broader power dynamics and the negotiation of cultural identities. “Twilight memories” emphasize the layered and complex nature of cultural memory, acknowledging that memory is not always complete or fully preserved.

Furthermore, Huysen argues that cultural memory is often accompanied by an inherent forgetting. Huysen wonders: “is it not the case that each and every memory inevitably depends both on distance and forgetting, the very things that undermine its desired stability and reliability and are at the same time essential to the vitality of memory itself?” Memory has always been changed with the passage of time because “our present will inevitably have an impact on what and how we remember” (Huysen, 1995). The interaction of remembrance with forgetting continually shapes memory of the past. Huysen focuses on how societies choose to remember or forget certain events or periods, and how these choices shape cultural narratives. He believes that “[t]he temporal aspect of such planned obsolescence is [...] amnesia. [...] the spread of amnesia in our culture is matched by a relentless fascination with memory and the past” (Huysen, 1995). Memory remains haunted by amnesia. Cultural amnesia is a constitutive part of cultural memory. Cultural amnesia refers to the phenomenon where societies collectively forget or lose connection with their past. Halimah Mohamed Ali and Aina Nabila Ahmad (2018) define “cultural amnesia” as loss of memory, caused by traumatic damage or inaccessibility of the origin. Mohamed Ali and Ahmad argue that “cultural amnesia that exists in the context of literature serves as a theme, motif, presentation tool, textual purpose, division of literary history, as well as narrative that replaces experience” (Ali and Ahmad, 2018). In Huysen’s analysis, this concept is

critical in understanding the contemporary preoccupation with memory and the proliferation of memory sites, like museums and memorials. Meanwhile, this forgetfulness is paradoxical because it arises simultaneously with an obsessive remembrance culture, where society is inundated with representations and commemorations of the past. In a word, cultural amnesia highlights the inherent tension between remembering and forgetting in memory. To address cultural amnesia, Huyssen advocates, firstly for a critical engagement with the past that goes beyond superficial commemoration, and then for the need to balance memory with a certain degree of forgetting.

It is the hybridity of memory and the distance between memory and the past that make it possible to represent an event from multiple perspectives. In a sense, Mo Yan's storytelling serves as a bridge between the past and the present, mediating the experiences of past generations for contemporary readers. By applying the theories of culture memory, especially the concept of "cultural amnesia", the paper will analyze how Mo Yan's narratives function as conduits for the transmission of memory. Mo Yan's narratives often engage with the complexities of historical memory, particularly in the context of rural China and its rapid transformation. "Cultural amnesia" can be applied to analyze how characters in Mo Yan's short stories navigate the changing landscape of memory as traditional rural life gives way to urbanization and modernity. Besides, since Mo Yan's stories often involve traumatic events, like political events, wars, and social disruptions, we can analyze how the characters remember these events, how they deal with the aftermath of historical trauma, and how their lives are affected by their memories of the past. The coexistence of trauma and memory in Mo Yan's short stories aligns with Huyssen's notion of complex and layered memory landscapes. Mo Yan's storytelling often involves the layering of multiple narratives and perspectives, and these layers can reflect temporal frames and offer insights into how memory and history are constructed within the narrative. This paper will examine how memory and history intersect within Mo Yan's narratives.

Meanwhile, it seems that Mo Yan's "late maturity" can fall into the category of cultural amnesia. "Late maturity" showcases the contrast and intersection between the past and the present. "Late" implies "early", and specifically the obsolescence of "early". A "late" society is struggling to catch up with time, looking forward to thriving at present and in the future, and sometimes not willing to remember the past. However, they could not stop thinking about the unhappy past. This contradiction between the past and the present leads to a reevaluation of Chinese history and culture. In Mo Yan's stories, rural China, in the process of modernization and urbanization, is such a society. Those late bloomers take time to be recognized, valued, and even fully appreciated. Late recognition in personal achievements can influence the construction of one's identity and the narrative of one's life story. And this shift in identity can also lead to a reinterpretation of past experiences. Meanwhile, memory plays a key role in shaping both individual and collective narratives. Delayed recognition can impact the way individuals remember their life stories. As Cubitt (2013) puts it, "[M]emory is, in practice, always selective". Memories can be revisited and interpreted in light of newfound accomplishments, contributing to a dynamic and evolving sense of self. On a societal level, late maturity can affect collective memory by postponing the recognition of certain historical events, and shaping the collective understanding of a society's identity. As a consequence, certain aspects of a society's past can be forgotten or undervalued, leading to a sense of cultural amnesia.

Textual analysis: Nostalgic narratives

In this collection, *A Late Bloomer*, Mo Yan records his journey back to his hometown in a literary manner. However, that hometown has already turned into a different place. The returned author encounters a series of changes with an impression of familiarity. Those changes provoke strong surges of nostalgia for the days of a bygone age. Naturally, Mo Yan turns to his memory of childhood, from space to temporality. In Mo Yan's eyes, time changes the world, but time can also carve things and make them better. The story, *Left-Handed Scythe*, is the first one in the book. The second one is *A Late Bloomer*, the same name as the collection. This arrangement has some meaning to understanding the book. The first story showcases the author's nostalgia, and thinking about time and change. In the second one, Mo Yan gives a picture of a late mature society, which explains what produces his longing for the root. In *Left-Handed Scythe*, multiple narratives reflect the complexity of temporal frames. There are two stories involved within this nostalgic narrative. One is about the blacksmiths, the other is about the boy, Tian Kui. The two stories are intertwined by the left-handed scythe. In the prelude, the author, or specifically the narrator, Mo Yan, explains why he chooses to write a story about blacksmiths: he did some work related to blacksmiths in his childhood. In the end of this prelude, the narrator says,

A person desperately wants to become some what, but he has never become that what; then this what would become his dream through his whole lifetime. That is the reason why I feel close to blacksmiths whenever sawing them, and feel very excited whenever hearing the clanging of hammers and iron. That is the reason why I want to write about blacksmiths from the beginning (Yan, 2020).

Through these words, we can see what the author is nostalgic about: a dream since childhood. That dream is pure and sweet, a symbol of the imagined past. Nostalgia plays a key role in the story, reflecting a longing for the past and traditional values. Memories for the past, the childhood, have driven Mo Yan to tell the story about the left-handed scythe. In other words, the nostalgic feelings have made Mo Yan obsess with the arts of ironing, the traditional lifestyle and custom. In section 1 and 2, the narrator returns to the past, his childhood, and he tells a story of blacksmiths, a story of a left-handed scythe. The young boy "I" is always looking forward to seeing these blacksmiths. The summer, the locust flowers, and the blacksmiths, all represent the great time in which "I" grew up. The narrator's fascination with blacksmiths is rooted in childhood memories. This connection to the past is a form of personal memory that resists the tide of cultural amnesia. The nostalgia is not just about the past but also about preserving these values in the present. It influences characters like Tian Kui, who embodies the adaptability associated with these traditional skills. In the conversation of the blacksmiths with other peasants, the left-handed scythe comes out. Section 3 to 5 tells a story about the young boy, Tian Kui, who uses the left-handed scythe, a tool specially made for him. He is brave, smart, and kind of mysterious. He is used to doing things with his left hand, since his right hand was chopped because of his prank on Xizi, Liu Laosan's mentally disabled son, in teenage years. Liu Laosan is bewildered and angered by Tian Kui's apparent ingratitude and aggression, feeling that Tian Kui's actions betray the historical bond between their families, since Liu's father once protected Tian Kui's grandfather during a political purge. The narrator doesn't give a

detailed explanation of how Tian Kui lost his right hand, but his life story is tightly interwoven with the historical context. The past of these boy's parents and grandparents has a key role in their own lives. Tian Kui's father attempts to reconcile by acknowledging his son's faults and offering an apology, but Liu's sense of betrayal persists, showing how historical debts and social hierarchies continue to influence their interactions. The story focuses on how Tian Kui deals with his disability. We can recognize the social situation of Tian Kui through the terms, like "work points", "landlords", and "poor peasants", which were often used in collective era and discourse of class struggle. Despite his good performance at school, Tian Kui does not continue his education because of his family situation and his disability. He chooses instead to help his family by cutting grass with his left-handed scythe, an act that symbolizes his unique but marginalized position in society. His ability to perform tasks with the iron hook demonstrates his resilience and adaptability. He mentions that since his father cut off his hand, he has lost his fear of anything, indicating a profound transformation in his character and a hardened resolve born out of trauma.

The left-handed scythe connects the different temporal frames. In section 6, even after many years, "I" still vividly remember the scene of the left-handed scythe being forged from steel:

Many years have passed, and I often dream of watching forging iron under the big willow tree on the edge of the village. The left-handed scythe, which has already begun to take shape, is about to be burned white in the hearth. No, it has already been burned white. The piece of steel which is about to be added to the scythe blade has also been burned white. [...] The yellow firelight of the hearth and the dazzling white light on the anvil shine on their faces which are like dark red iron. The three people stand in a triangle, the three hammers chase each other. There seems to be no room in between, running like the wind, like thunder. The softest and the hardest, the coldest and the warmest, mix together, like a piece of passionate and melodious music. This is labor, this is creation, this is life. Young people grow up like this, the dream comes true like this. Love and hatred are both presented and dissolved in such a vigorous forging. (14-15. My translation).

In the season of lotus flowers blooming, the narrator "I", a young boy, is a loyal audience of three blacksmiths. Watching them forging iron is like watching a fantastic art performance. After all these years, the boy becomes an old man, the present "I". I still remember the blacksmiths, and their forging performance. In the memory, a vivid story is created. The act of storytelling is a form of resistance to cultural amnesia. By recounting personal and communal histories, the story ensures that these memories are not forgotten, even in the face of societal pressures to prioritize the present. This detailed process of forging the scythe reflects a nostalgia for the handicraft skills that were once highly valued in the village. The transformation of raw iron into a functional scythe is a metaphor for the shaping of memory and history. The scythe itself, a traditional agricultural tool, represents the connection to the past and the cyclical nature of life and work in rural China. On top of this, like the left-handed scythe forged in the fire, the past or the memory of the past is also forged in time. The scythe also becomes a tangible artifact of memory, embodying the skills and experiences of the past. Such artifacts play a crucial role in resisting cultural amnesia by providing physical anchors for memory. In the symbolic of memory, the left scythe connects the past with the

present. In last section, the narrator returns from the present to the recent past, telling us what happened to Tian Kui after many years. The matchmaker asks him if he dares to marry the widow Huanzi who is considered to be fated to mourn her husband's death because her two husbands are all dead. Huanzi is also one of the victims of the prank played by Tian Kui and other boys. Tian kui just says a word "Dare" to answer the matchmaker. The brave boy using that left-handed scythe seems to come up again. After so many years, people died, many things changed. But there is still something unchanged, or becoming more certain. By accepting Huanzi, Tian Kui not only challenges social norms but also upholds a personal and familial sense of duty reminiscent of traditional values. Mo Yan's nostalgic narrative explores the interplay between tradition and modernity, the tension between remembering and forgetting. His left-handed narrative plays a role of preserving memories and histories of individuals. Mo Yan uses nostalgia for traditional craftsmanship to ground the narrative in a rich cultural context. This nostalgia is not static but dynamic, allowing for innovation and adaptation. The creation of the left-handed scythe, a mixture of traditional skill and personal innovation, symbolizes the possibility of growth and change within the bounds of tradition. The ability of individuals like Tian Kui to thrive despite personal and societal challenges, parallels the rural community's slow but steady adaptation to changing circumstances. It reflects a society that, while rooted in its tradition, is capable of developing and embracing new methods. A late mature society or a late bloomer, should be able to flourish in the vicissitude of time, just like the left scythe forging in the fire.

In the second story of the book, *A Late bloomer*, Mo Yan uses "late maturity" to reflect cultural amnesia. If *Left-handed Scythe* tells a story about memory of the past, the unchanged, then *A Late Bloomer* touches the topic of changing. In this story, hometown has changed so much that the narrator feels kind of strange and even absurd. The old and the new are in sharp contrast in this hometown narrative. The opening paragraph of the first section gives a simple picture of the hometown being transformed into a prosperous tourist attraction, a film and television base, with historical landmarks repurposed or erased to appeal to visitors. This transformation of the hometown into a tourist hot spot reflects the rapid commercialization and urbanization that occurred in China following economic reforms initiated in the late 20th century. As for this flourish tourist, the narrator feels confused for there is nothing but some newly built landscape, crude and uncreative. This physical transformation symbolizes a collective amnesia, where a true cultural and historical significance of the town is overshadowed by commercial interests. It highlights the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing modernization. On the stage of this new hometown, Jiang Er, a typical late bloomer in his own view, is depicted vividly. Jiang Er is a childhood friend of the narrator Mo Yan, one of his neighbors. Jiang Er's ups and downs showcase changing times since 1950s in China. This point can easily be seen through Jiang Er' name change during the Cultural Revolution, which was tightly related to the political atmosphere then: first Jiang Tianxia (means the world), and then Jiang Tian (means heaven), then Jiang Da (means great), finally Jiang Er (means two). This act of conformity to the political climate is funny and ironic because it is meant to ensure survival but leads to a loss of identity. As for the change of Jiang Er from being a fool to being a rich businessman, the narrator comments that it all serves the practical purpose of survival. His attempt to engage in business is more about keeping up with societal expectations than a true reflection of personal growth. Changes in his life, such as

reconnecting with his past or adapting to societal changes, are surface-level adjustments rather than deep-seated transformations, just like the hometown's transformation for appealing to visitors.

Jiang Er's story is temporarily intervened by others'. The narration returns to early 1970s in section 2 and 3, and a story of watching movies is recounted. A collision between these rural boys and the sent-down young people from the city happens around the movie-watching. A important role appears in this collision, that is, Chang Lin, the leader of the rural boy group. This part of narration shows some kind of bittersweet feelings. On the one hand, in these young boys' eyes, the movies are the only recreation they can get at that time, just like the bright full moon in the sky. In order to watch the movies, they work very hard in the field. The joy and excitement can be seen through the detailed description of how they labor in the field and how they get to the farm where the movies are showed for the sent-down youth. On the other hand, the hardness of the time is manifested in the boys' suffering from exhaustion, starvation, and discrimination from the sent-down youth in the farm. However, these rural boys do not yield to the hard time. They drink the river water to overcome hunger on the way to the farm. Chang Lin is exactly the epitome. He is rude, like farting to provoke those sent-down young people. Meanwhile, he defeats one sent-down young man with a movement of some wushu which he learned from Jiang Er's grandfather, Jiang Qishan who is admired as a hero for his wushu and killing a Japanese soldier during the war. It seems that Chang Lin has inherited some of Jiang Qishan's heroism. This can also be seen through the vivid description of Chang Lin eating the leaves of the Indian mallow. Because of lack of food, he can only eat the wild leaves to improve his strength. And the rudeness and fierceness of his eating the leaves really impress the sent-down youth.

The narrator goes back to Jiang Er since section 4, focusing on "late maturity". Jiang Er believes that he was not pretending being silly himself, but a late bloomer. And he then says that late maturity is a main characteristic of the Jiang family: "When others are being wise, we are silly, when others are gradually exhausted, we are just being enlightened, having a very good memory, getting bright eyes. I am just an example" (Yan, 2020). After the period of hard time, Jiang Er has become a famous entrepreneur in Northeast Gaomi. He has made a fortune by the chance of Mo Yan winning the Nobel Prize. He has built a scenic spot based on the plot of "I", Mo Yan's novel *Yellow Corn*. Even the author's own family house has also been rebuilt as a tourist attraction. The scenic spot and other local products attract a lot of visitors. Mo Yan intersperses the past life of these so-called late bloomers. In the narration of Jiang Er and other characters' booming business. The silliest person has become the wisest one. The story builds up to a climax in the so-called patriotic challenge competition held in the Yellow Corn Scenic Spot: "(Jiang says) Everything in the world is related to politics, including culture, sports, and even wushu. [...] This is truly the positive energy" (Yan, 2020). In the end, the narrator Mo Yan finally understands that all of this is just a play, "another level of late maturity" (Yan, 2020). An era of late maturity has come. Mo Yan uses the word "late maturity" to describe his thinking about time and society. In Mo Yan's view, Jiang Er is not a true late bloomer. Jiang Er's later failure in business is attributed to his inability to truly adapt and grow, indicating that his supposed late maturity is not as profound as it appears. Indeed, the nostalgic impulse revolves around the longing for the idealized past, the magic childhood, like in *Left-Handed Scythe*, but it focus much more on the symptoms of late maturity in society. In such a society, everything can be marketed, becoming a commodity, even nostalgia; everybody seems to be an

opportunist. These fake late bloomers like Jiang Er make memories of the past a commodity, complying with the new economic rules. They move with the times. Just as Jiang Er says: "We late bloomers will take the time of one year to make the accomplishments which take the early bloomers ten years" (Yan, 2020). People like Jiang Er, have already lost the spirit of heroic human beings. They are regressive human species.

A society will never be able to get rid of its history, especially those traumatic memories. The past is part of the present by the means of memory. The first bite of the Zhangqiu green onion immediately "arouses my stomach, my heroic spirit, and my homesickness" (Yan, 2020). Compared with the changing story of Jiang Er, the taste of the green onion seems to be the same as before. "Heaven can be changed, while food and taste can never be changed" (Yan, 2020). Therefore, in this story, Mo Yan shows his critical thinking about how late maturity can lead to cultural amnesia and how a society and individuals perceive and value their own cultural identity over time, that is, the change of "early" and "late".

Conclusion

A Late Bloomer is a nostalgic fiction. In his old age, the author Mo Yan returns to his hometown, and looks back at his life's journey. The dream of childhood has always been there, fantastic, and haunting. The home he is familiar with seems to disappear, just existing in his memory. A rapidly changing late mature society causes the author a sharp feeling of nostalgia. And that nostalgic impulse drives him to look back to the past with a present perspective. This produces the complexity of temporal layers in storytelling. When telling the stories of contemporary people, these new people, the past always come up from time to time. The author not just recounts the story of contemporary people at present, but he also narrates the history of these people, or even their ancestors. And more often, the balance of narration decisively shifts to the past which continually comes up in the heroism of ancestors. The narration of the present tends to return back to the old days. The sharp contrast between the old and the new provides the frame of narration. The society is experiencing cultural amnesia. The split between the past, memory, and representation stimulates the creativity and imagination of literary works. On top of this, memories of the characters, the narrator "I", and the author Mo Yan are all interwoven together. There is a gap between time and memory. And the gap makes Mo Yan tell his story about "late maturity" which manifests his nostalgia and critical thinking. On the one hand, "late maturity" expresses Mo Yan's anxiety about the present rural China, and even the whole society. "Late maturity" showcases Mo Yan's criticizing the negative impact of a late mature society. In Mo Yan's opinion, "late maturity" can lead to cultural amnesia when people focus too much on economic development and technological progress. On the other hand, "late maturity" can mean the ordeal of time, just like the left scythe being burned in the hearth and beat on the anvil: "The left scythe has been made. This is a sharp tool forged with diligence, a real personal creation, the blacksmiths perform at the top level" (Yan, 2020). People may get matured slowly, flourish lately, that is, being a late bloomer. Nevertheless, they should never forget the original conscience, the history where they come from, they should face the challenges of time. We are what we remember. This is the method of curing amnesia. This is what Mo Yan tries to tell us.

In Mo Yan's view, history is not necessarily progressive, sometimes even regressive. As Huyssen puts it, "Progress and historical teleologies were embraced across much of the political spectrum, but this inevitably meant shedding the past. The price paid for progress was the destruction of past ways of living and being in the world. [...] And the destruction of the past brought forgetting. From the beginning, modernity was Janus-faced in its negotiations of cultural memory" (Huyssen, 2003). Through the concept of "late maturity", Mo Yan's critical thinking about cultural amnesia can be analyzed from two aspects: criticizing the false late bloomers and pursuing a way to deal with the vicissitude of time. On the one hand, Mo Yan ironizes some so-called late bloomers for their dishonesty, greed, and anxious for quick success. They are also called "new peasants", different from those early ones in the collective era. And then he points out the negative impact of the rapid economic growth on the whole society. The late bloomers just mentioned are exactly the direct result of the impact. In the author's view, they are not true late bloomers, although they all call themselves so. They are greed, selfish, and materialistic, kind of like species' regression of descendants in Northeast Gaomi. On the other hand, a society with late maturity causes the author's feelings of nostalgia. This impulse of nostalgia drives Mo Yan to consider ways to counteract the loss of memory, or to get access to the cultural origin, and more importantly, what a true late bloomer is like. Being late does not matter, what really matters is becoming mature for both society and individuals. So Mo Yan focuses on the maturity of a society in which people are able to handle their lives in a sensible manner. And this is essential for building a healthy community. Mo Yan believes that only this can hold on to our memories of the past, which is meaningful to the sustained development of society. Mo Yan implicates that we are living in the present, and we also need to live in the process of remembering and facing the past.

Just as Huyssen argues, "The turn toward memory is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space" (Huyssen, 2003). As a writer, Mo Yan tries to look for the idealized past in the memory when facing with the present, this late-maturing society in his stories. In this late-maturing society, people seek to catch up. During the era of market socialism, these late bloomers find their capability of blooming in a new economic order. For them, the past means nothing but a method of marketing memory. In the years of economic reform, everything seems to be different, including division of labor, domestic life, thought and culture. All of this causes Mo Yan's nostalgia, longing for the past, the simpler past. Facing up to the totally changing society, while everyone seems to be pursuing success in the present or in the recent future, Mo Yan looks back to the past. The impulse of nostalgia pushes Mo Yan to retrieve the memory of his readers, just like the smell of the Zhangqiu green onion triggers the author's nostalgia. Through literature, Mo Yan manages to resist cultural amnesia. Meanwhile, he showcases how people's memories of the past affect their present life. Mo Yan tends to get the past involved in the present in his narratives. In the contrast between the present and the past, Mo Yan explores the fundamental ethical issues: good and evil. Human society may always progress, but these old issues are everlasting.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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